

Management For The 21st Century: “Linking The Generation Gap”

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Abstract

This paper will give insight to the managers of today for the need to bridge the generation gap between Generation Xers (people born between 1965 and 1980) and the Baby Boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964). “Linking the gap” allows for greater understanding of the differences between the two major groups in today’s workforce and provides opportunities for business success by promoting cooperation. Common misconceptions about Generation Xers as well as their wants and needs from their employers are discussed. The paper’s emphasis is on understanding how Generation Xers and Baby Boomers may come together to benefit the company.

Introduction

Entering into the new millennium has not changed the way management must view their employees. A major element of successful management is the ability to motivate people to perform at high levels. The more accurately managers are able to determine what motivates their employees, the more successful they can be at maximizing productivity and enhancing performance. In order to remain productive, Baby Boomers who supervise Generation Xers must understand the unique circumstances that have governed the upbringing of Xers and be willing to compromise their expectations regarding this generation’s work ethic and their way of balancing issues affecting their work and life (O’Brannon, 2001).

Much has been discussed and written about generational differences – especially concerning Baby Boomers and Generation Xers. “Boomers” are typically considered to be individuals born between 1946 and 1964 while “Xers” are individuals born between 1965 and 1980 (Coupland, 1991; Bradford and Rains, 1992; Howe and Strauss, 1993). According to Montenegro (2002) 94 percent of the individuals aged 45 to 74 years are still in the workforce, and 69 percent of those intend to continue working into traditional “retirement age”. Thus, the need to understand generational differences will continue to be important for the foreseeable future. Effective Boomer managers, in addition to understanding the times and generational characteristics of their Xer employees, must assure that employees understand and respect one another’s differences. Effective managers foster open discussion of how generational differences influence attitudes toward work and organizations, and they provide opportunities for multi-generational employees to contribute their best concurrent with meeting organizational goals. When managers and coworkers do not understand each other’s generational differences, tension increases and job satisfaction and productivity decrease. A generational perspective enables managers to leverage employee uniqueness as a source of learning, productivity, and innovation and to create and role model a shared vision of positive co-worker relationships. According to Kopperschmidt (2000), today’s multi-generational workforce brings different values and demands to work. A major task of today’s managers is to bring these employees together in ways that provide fair and equitable opportunities for each individual to contribute their best and to achieve their personal goals in alignment with organizational goals.

The purpose of this paper is to provide information to Boomers regarding Xers’ needs and attitudes toward work. The information has been gathered through a review of the extensive literature on the subject with the intent of providing the reader with useful ideas in a concise manner. Myths and truths about what Xers want and need are presented. Then, the discussion focuses on practical issues and guidance for successful management.

Understanding The Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomer generation, those born between 1946-1964, accounts for approximately 45 percent of the workforce (Learner, 2002). This generation mimicked the work patterns of their parents, a generation that had gone through a deep depression and a world war. Their career aspirations were centered upon a single vocation and the willingness to work for one company for 30 to 40 years (Herman, 2001). Characteristics of this generation included optimism, team orientation and personal satisfaction or gratification from their work. Boomers tend to separate their work from their personal lives, viewing work as a means to an end. They tend to measure their success by their career advancement and in the possessions they have acquired. They have worked long hours and hard, accepting over time as part of the job. Therefore they tend to be demanding and controlling, and insist that their way is best way (Slania, 2000). Baby boomers are more willing to sacrifice their individuality to adapt to the Company's mission. They accept orders with little questioning of their supervisors. While they would prefer to work in one line of work, they are willing to accept different positions if they lead to advancements. They feel they have paid their dues and they expect the same sacrifice and obedience from their workers (Slania, 2000). Older workers continuing in the workforce will have an upper hand. Baby boomers at the executive level will face age discrimination when they look for a new job; age and experience are not viewed as being the same when the younger managers make decisions on hiring (Wah, 1999). Eitelberg and Thompson, (2002 March) point out some of the work ethics of the baby boomers: This generation has the highest labor force and participation rate of any generation in American history; Most baby boomer women work, 80 percent are working; they are well educated and are twice as likely as their parents to hold a high school or college degree; they have a higher divorce rate-36 percent of the women between age 40 and 44 are divorced; the boomers also pioneered the nontraditional living arrangements; Boomer women have fewer children and they have a higher rate of childless homes; Boomer standard of living in many cases is higher than the standard of living of their parents.

Understanding The Xers

Tulgan (1995) notes that most Xers are managed poorly because managers buy into the misperception of Xers as a slacker generation believing Xers to be disloyal, arrogant, cynical, and lazy. Tulgan suggests that Generation X is one of the most widely misunderstood phenomena facing the HR professional today. These misperceptions destroy the ability of managers to bring out the best in Xers and deprive companies of the innovations of a talented generation. Generation X brings their knowledge of technology and an ability to concentrate on a number of tasks at one time. Filipczak (1994) notes that, Xers are either adept users of or at least unafraid to try new technology. Combine this absence of fear with the ability to parallel thinking and process information quickly, and you've got workers who pick up software programs and learn it quickly (p.26). Miner (1999) discusses and dispels five general misconceptions about Gen Xers as follows:

1. *Xers are disloyal:* They are not disloyal, but they are wary. Xers are entering the work force at a time of corporate downsizing. They've seen hardworking, loyal employees laid off. Xers will stick with a company under certain conditions, but their experiences have proved that the old workplace bargain of loyalty in exchange for security is obsolete.
2. *Xers are arrogant:* Xers are intensely self confident, but not arrogant. For various reasons, Xers have learned to do things for themselves and to handle problems alone.
3. *Xers have short attention spans:* We have all been changed by the information revolution, but Xers are the first generation to grow up in it, and it has shaped the way they think, learn, and communicate. They are able to quickly sift through, select, and assimilate information from simultaneous sources. Xers' style of thinking, learning, and communicating is more attuned to the twenty-first century than the old fashioned way.
4. *Xers are not willing to pay dues:* It's not that they're unwilling. It is just that their experience with corporate downsizing has shown that dues paying does not pay off. The only source of security they believe in is themselves: their ability to work, solve problems, and add value to a company. This is something they can take from place to place.
5. *Xers cannot stand deferred gratification:* It's not that they can't defer gratification, but that they need constant feedback from employers in order to feel secure. They prefer to work in a way that produces tangible results every day.

Tulgan (1995) suggests that Xers place great importance on being trusted to get the job done, and on being given the freedom and flexibility to let them set their own hours to do so. Jennings (2000), writing about hiring young accountants, states that lifestyle issues are critically important to Xers and include such things as flexible schedules, shorter commuting distance, interesting work culture, and prestige. Adams (1999) says that Xers see work more as a lifestyle decision than a means to support themselves.

Poskatitis (1999) notes that many boomers in executive management view Xers as disloyal and impatient. As boomers, they likely had to wait their turn and “played the game.” But, Xers enter the workplace with infinite opportunities and only half the number of competitors. Most Xers recognize the need to earn their wings, but view the hierarchy as dumb - too much politicking and not enough real work. They are comfortable with unpredictable career paths and fast-changing assignments and easily bored with repetitive duties and structured job descriptions.

Wah (2000), reporting on a study commissioned by Deloitte & Touche LLP and The Corporate State, notes that Xers’ lack of loyalty is largely due to seeing their parents downsized – but that this has led Xers to strike out on their own and develop themselves as a brand rather than becoming company “lifers.” Xers can work well in a group or individually. Xers are suited to the participatory, community-building nature of teams (Hickens, 1999).

Xers realize there is no such thing as job security. Instead, they adopt a new employment bargain: if employers will meet their job demands, then they will do a good job while employed in the organization. They expect to attain and maintain career security and enhance their marketability through challenging jobs in which they are constantly learning and through employer provided on the job training and opportunities to continue their formal education. Xers expect balance between work and leisure time, and they expect work to be fun. They demand a technologically up-to-date work environment, competent, credible managers and co-workers, and managers who coach and mentor rather than command and micromanage. Xers change jobs if their work demands are not met. Rather than organizational commitment, they speak of alignment with organizations that value their competencies, reward productivity rather than longevity, and create a sense of community (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Managing The Xers

The aforementioned study by Wah (2000) reached several conclusions about “managing Gen Xers strategically” as follows:

1. Allow Xers to be entrepreneurs within their organizations so that generational differences can be turned into business opportunities.
2. Make Xers feel valuable. Through feedback show them how their efforts can contribute to company goals and reward them accordingly. Make sure Xers know their investment of their time is well worth it.
3. Help Xers develop various career patterns with the company by giving them different areas of responsibility.
4. Be a source of stability. Communicate with Xers about how they fit into the company’s larger structure and goals.
5. Encourage mentoring. It is crucial to Xers’ overall career satisfaction.
6. Create a culture that facilitates a balanced lifestyle.

According to Miner (1999), frequent feedback should be provided. The traditional six-month or 12-month formal reviews are not enough to satisfy Xers. Managers should give specific feedback each time a task is completed, with concrete suggestions for improvement if necessary. Managers should not assume, that, because Xers are so independent they don’t want a mentor. Most Xers welcome the chance to create long-term bonds of loyalty with teaching managers and mentors, especially in a world where they cannot believe in long-term bonds of loyalty with established organizations.

Work schedules should be as flexible as circumstances permit. Xers seek career security (marketability) and expect to learn new skills during challenging work experiences. Many Xers complain that managers give lip

service to positive attitude, empowerment, and involvement, but their actions don't match their words (Bradford and Raines, 1992).

Tulgan (1997) offers strategies involving recruitment, orientation, and performance appraisals as follows:

1. *Recruitment:* In job advertisements, include an enticing recruitment message and an accurate overview of job expectations. Avoid using hype. Instead, highlight opportunities for learning marketable skills and building relationships. Describe job expectations frankly and arrange for interviewees to interact with other employees.
2. *Orientation:* Approach orientation realistically. Don't imply that new employees must pay their dues to advance or that they must follow a prescribed orientation agenda. Discuss ways they can concurrently meet goals for their unit, the organization, and themselves.
3. *Performance appraisals:* Generation X employees report that traditional performance reviews occur too infrequently to be helpful; don't provide accurate, helpful, feedback – focus on personalities more than performance; and create unrealistic expectations for raises and promotions. In other words, provide frequent, accurate, specific, and timely feedback.

Zemke, et al (2000), assert that generational savvy managers value differences and view them as strengths. Creation of an environment in which each employee's focus is on the business of business mandates aggressive communication and difference deployment. Aggressive communication is essential because unarticulated assumptions and unconscious criticism are at the root of most generational differences. Articulating and discussing these differences redirects employees from complaining and negative behavior to work efforts that benefit from different perspectives. Generational savvy managers accommodate employee differences, create workplace choice, operate from a theoretically sound, sophisticated management style, respect competence and initiative, and nourish retention.

Tulgan, (2000), in summarizing his discussion of managing Xers, considers how the following eight factors that today's workers are looking for in their employment might be accommodated:

1. *Performance-based compensation.* The amount of compensation must be competitive with the marketplace but should not be limited by any factor other than performance - employees who work harder and better will be rewarded proportionately.
2. *Flexible schedules.* As long as they are meeting goals and deadlines, people want to know that they will have some control over their own schedules. The more control, the better.
3. *Flexible location.* Again, as long as they are meeting goals and deadlines, people want to know that they have some control over where they work. This includes the power to define and personalize one's own workspace.
4. *Marketable skills.* People are looking for formal and informal training opportunities. They want to be assured that they will be building skills and knowledge faster than they become obsolete.
5. *Access to decision-makers.* Today's workforce doesn't want to wait until they climb the ladder to build relationships with important leaders, managers, clients, customers, vendors or co-workers. They want access right away.
6. *Personal credit for results achieved.* Today's talent doesn't want to work hard to make somebody else look good. People want to put their own names on the tangible results they produce.
7. *A clear area of responsibility.* People want to know that they will have 100 percent control of something, anything, so they can use that area of responsibility as their own personal proving ground.
8. *The chance for creative expression.* People want to have a clear picture of all the guidelines and parameters that will constrain their creativity so they can imagine the terrain in which they will have freedom to do things their own way.

Concluding Remarks

Successful management of Xers begins with providing the right working environment; one that gives them meaningful work, with clear and defined goals as well as holding them responsible for results. Xers need to be given plenty of room to be creative because the entrepreneurial spirit that identifies this generation can be a source of tremendous productivity. Managers need to provide Xers with lots of training to help them build career security by acquiring marketable skills and expertise. According to Tulgan (1995), the surest way to gain Xers' loyalty is to help them develop 'self-building' career security.

Generation Xers will help managers lead their companies into the future. Xers are independent, technically literate individuals, who need to be challenged, are anxious to learn, want to be valued and won't settle for less than they deserve. With all of these characteristics, Xers are able to produce endless results for their companies. According to Jurkiewicz and Brown (1998), managing today's workforce requires a knowledge of the similarities of employees in general, balanced by an understanding of the generational influences dividing the groups outside of work.



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Notes